

A Brief Reflection on Hebrews

I suspect that we evangelicals in America haven't grasped the message of the book called Hebrews. It's an exceedingly important one, but I fear that almost all of us totally miss it. Preachers love to give sermons on Hebrews because of its lofty Christology. Preachers of an Arminian persuasion routinely use the warning passages in Hebrews to promote their soteriology. For most of us however (I strongly suspect) the details about the Old Testament in the book turn us off. Moreover, the comments readily available on this book (correctly) indicate it was written for Jewish believers at the time of the very early church who, probably because of persecution, intended to return to Mosaic Judaism; and since that's not a temptation for the overwhelming majority of modern American evangelicals (almost all of us are Gentiles), there's no perceived need to read Hebrews. So we avoid the study and reflection on this lovely and precious portion of Scripture that it deserves, indeed, that we need to do.

Allow me first to digress a bit. God gave His beloved people of Israel a stark choice: To love Him (that is, walk in His ways and keep His commands) and live and be blessed. Or don't love Him and remain dead (spiritually dead, that is), and suffer evil. God wanted this for His people: **“that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life . . . ”** (Deuteronomy 30:15-19). There were only two options! They could love the Lord their God with all their being, or not. And if not, suffer terrible consequences. That dichotomous choice was never modified or withdrawn. The story of the entire Old Testament is the story of Israel's failure to love God as He demanded, and the drastic consequences of that failure. Those two options weren't just for Israel.

Paul picked up on this stark dichotomy in his Epistle to the Romans (1:18-32). But he expanded on it by saying that God's expectation applied to all humanity; that is, it even included Gentiles. He states that all people not only know that God exists, but they know a fair bit about Him, e.g., His eternal power and divine nature, and that God holds us accountable for that knowledge. So either we glorify Him and give Him thanks, or we don't. And if we don't, God hands us over to committing vile sins for which we're condemned. God allows people to live in futility, darkness and foolishness, but at terrible cost. In other words, we're not to play games with God. He demands a lot from us, and He holds us accountable for our response. The author of Hebrews takes this principle even further.

I think the author of Hebrews is absolutely brilliant. Hebrews was probably initially a transcript of an exhortation that he gave, although at its very end it's called a letter. Its initial hearers may have been the Jews of Acts 15:5, but this is speculative. The text of Hebrews opens with a bang: God speaks! The God of the Bible is a speaking God from Genesis 1:3 on. Why is that important? Because if God speaks, WE MUST LISTEN. And if we listen, because of who God is, we must trust what He says and obey it, or at least act on it in the only way appropriate to what it is He spoke.

God spoke, for example, to Noah. Noah listened to God, and he obeyed His voice. So Noah built a gigantic boat, according to God's specifications, even though no one in that pre-flood civilization knew what rain or a flood is. And Noah was saved from that horrible judgment. Abraham listened to the voice of God and, trusting God, he obeyed Him. As a result, Abraham became the father of all who are saved and blessed. To refuse to listen to God, or to refuse to obey what God says, results in tragedy. Adam was blessed uniquely with the opportunity to experience the living God, but he disobeyed God's voice and suffered grievously. David was a man after God's own heart, yet he refused to obey in certain particulars and as a consequence suffered terribly. Solomon was God's deliberate choice for king but he also disobeyed in certain particulars and terrible consequences resulted. I could add dozens of names to the list of those who disobeyed God's voice and suffered loss; it's almost the theme of the Old Testament. Hebrews opens this way because the author fully understands this great, cosmic spiritual principle: God speaks/we listen/trusting God, we obey Him.

The author goes on to say, **“We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away”** (2:1). Those Jews, his hearers, needed to heed God's voice and persevere in obedience

to Christ because, if not, they would “drift away.” That’s the message of Hebrews! Either we listen to Christ, who is God, and trustingly obey Him, or we suffer a drifting away. What does “drifting away” mean? The term means to gradually and aimlessly abandon a certain position. The term was used in Proverbs 3:21, **“My son, do not drift away but keep my counsel and intent; they will be life for you.”** Drifting away means refusing to continue obeying truth, which is life, and therefore *necessarily* lapsing instead into what is death. It’s that dichotomy again; there are only two options, spiritual life or spiritual death.

In 3:7-15, the author compares refusing to persevere in Christ to rebellion. He links together rebellion, sinfulness, disobedience and unbelief. Again: disobedience is akin to unbelief, sinfulness and rebellion. And this is addressed to believers! To ignore or disobey what God has said is to dishonor God Himself. Woe to the person who dishonors God! In 4:12-13, the author reminds his hearers that they must one day give an account to God for their response to His Word. In 5:11-6:1, the author implies that his hearers should be able to distinguish good from evil because, by implication, going on to maturity in Christ is good, but refusing to do that is evil. It is *our responsibility* to be diligent in making our hope sure and receive what has been promised in the Gospel (6:12). Twice, the author reminds his hearers of the dreadful consequences of disobedience, of refusing to press on to maturity in Christ (10:30-31 and 12:29). This is heavy. We must persevere in doing the will of God (10:36), because the alternative is . . . ugly (see v. 39).

Hebrews comes to a climax with, **“Therefore . . . let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us”** (12:1), and **“See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks”** (12:25). These aren’t slogans. This is our author’s earnest (and sacred) plea. If disgrace or suffering or some other loss comes to us because of our commitment and our faithfully serving Him, great! Jesus also suffered disgrace (13:12-13).

Our Hebrews author is fully conversant with Deuteronomy. His use of Deuteronomy becomes increasingly strident as we work our way thru his book. God hasn’t changed. What has changed is all that God has given to us in Christ, in this new era, in this new dispensation. So our accountability has grown proportionally. There’s another cosmic principle. It is, **“To whom much is given, much is required”** (Luke 12:48c). And the author of Hebrews lays out for us all the privileges and blessings that God has lovingly lavished on us because of the obedient suffering of the Son.

There’s no such thing as a passive Christianity, such as what, unfortunately, we’ve inherited as a more than fifteen-centuries-old church tradition. Passive Christians, spectator Christians, are necessarily immature. They live the main part of their lives no differently than atheists. Passive Christianity nullifies God’s revealed will for His people. Scripture simply doesn’t allow a passive Christianity. All that we’ve been given by God’s grace doesn’t allow it. Hebrews doesn’t allow it. The thrust of Hebrews is, we’ve been given *so much* in Christ that we’re responsible for . . . *a lot*. We’re accountable for nothing less than progressing on to maturity and to fruitful service. Hebrews was penned, I am arguing here, precisely for the situation in the Church today; the book is critically important to us.

I find a spiritual law in what we’ve covered in this lesson. It’s this: Whether believer or unbeliever and whether O.T. era or Church age, the natural progression of all who fail or refuse to honor God, to serve God, or to be grateful to God, is to self-indulgence. And then to worldliness, idolatry and sin. God gives us over to darkness and death if we know what we must do but won’t do it. As Creator and Redeemer, God has a claim on our lives, and we are responsible to Him for all that He’s revealed, for all that He’s willed for us. We must NEVER ignore the God who speaks, nor reject His truths, nor refuse to do His will. Disobedience is defiance. God may not allow repentance!

Believers in the Church age have been given the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit to empower us to serve Christ and bear fruit, *good* fruit, and to be godly. We have only this life, this one opportunity, to know and love and serve God as He has commanded. May Christ find us mature and faithful on the day we stand before Him.